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AUTHOR Seligson, Michelle; Coltin, Lillian
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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest provides basic information about school-age day care programs. Discussion focuses briefly on options available to families with school-age children, developmental needs of school-age children, characteristics of high quality school-age programs, supportive services for self-care, and ways of improving school-age child care programs. The newly enacted federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, the Dependent Care Block Grant, special school-age child care legislation in at least 14 states, municipal sponsorship, and increased corporate interest are examples of program development. In addition, public schools have begun to form partnerships with provider agencies and to offer programs. It is concluded that good school-age child care must be understood as both a mediating influence that may prevent damage to children and an investment in the well-being of children and their families. (RH)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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Approaches to School-Age Child Care

Michelle Seligson and Lillian Coltin

School-age child care includes almost any program that regularly enrolls children from kindergarten through early adolescence during the times when schools are traditionally closed. This includes programs operated by schools, family day care providers, recreation centers, youth-serving organizations, and child care centers. Also known as *extended day programs*, before-and-after school programs provide enrichment, academic instruction, recreation and supervised care. An array of drop-in and part-time programs also serve an ad hoc child care function.

Options Available to Families of School-Age Children

Changes in family structure and values have altered the way in which many children are cared for. More mothers are in the labor force; more families are headed by a single parent; and fewer relatives are available to care for children. Increasing numbers of families are looking for ways to care for their children in before-and-after school programs or through the use of a patchwork quilt of care arrangements.

There are many options for school-age care. Each offers advantages and disadvantages, and none is right for all children under all circumstances. Some children may benefit from the slower pace and smaller environment of a family day care home, while others may need the larger physical and social setting of an after-school program. Children with special talents may enjoy a narrowly focused program that allows them to improve their skills, while other children may require highly varied programs that help them maintain their interests.

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Developmental Needs of School-age Children

Self-care arrangements do not meet the developmental needs of some school-age children. As these children navigate the passage from early childhood to adolescence, they need opportunities to make friends, play, develop skills and initiative, see products through to completion, and receive attention and appreciation from caring adults.

Many professionals are concerned about children who are on their own after school and children for whom relationships with other children, adults, and family members are no longer a given. Seligson and Fink (1989) raised a number of questions about what this situation means for children, parents, and community. For example, what will happen to those children who lack the out-of-school experiences which were once considered part of a healthy childhood? How much self-care is appropriate, and at what age is it appropriate? Are children on their own at greater risk for premature sexual experimentation or drug or alcohol use?

Characteristics of Quality School-Age Programs

Baden and others (1982) summarized three years of research on programs in the U.S. In the course of this research, it was discovered that the best school-age child care programs have certain common elements. These programs:

- offer a safe environment that fosters optimal development;
- employ a sufficient number of qualified, well-trained staff;
- are administered efficiently;
- encourage staff-parent interaction;
- balance activities to include structured and unstructured time, teacher-directed and child-initiated experiences, and a range of activities;
- capitalize on the interests of the children and opportunities for informal, social learning;
- use community resources as much as possible;
- communicate clear, consistent expectations and limits to children;
- provide indoor and outdoor space for active play, and places for socialization and private time.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has established the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, which offers accreditation to centers serving children through age eight. Its validation criteria confirm the elements of quality programming mentioned above.

The School-Age Child Care Project of Wellesley College Center for Research on Women has created self-guided

assessment instruments for school-age child care programs. Assessing School-Age Child Care Quality (ASQ) examines a program to determine which areas are strong and which could be improved. ASQ is designed to create a dialogue among program participants as they explore strategies for program change.

Supportive Services: Some Back-up Solutions

In addition to adult-supervised child care programs, some communities offer supportive services for self-care. These include educational materials and curricula that provide information for latchkey children and their parents; telephone *reassurance lines* staffed by phone counselors trained to provide a friendly voice and occasional advice; and block parent programs using trained volunteers who make their homes available during after-school hours in case of emergency. These programs are designed not to address the day-to-day needs of children after school, but rather to reduce the possibility of serious trouble confronting a child.

Few studies have measured the impact of self-care on children over time. One study of former latchkey children found that negative reactions to unresolved stress did persist into adulthood. A handful of studies indicated that children in after-school programs did better in terms of academic performance and social adjustment than peers who were not in care. Although none of these studies included rigorous comparison groups (Miller & Marx, 1990), they did offer an indication of the benefits of high quality child care.

Improving School-Age Child Care

If the policy agenda for after-school child care follows the pattern of preschool child care, the key challenge in forthcoming years will be to determine the indicators of program quality (Powell, 1987). The school-age child care field is developing so rapidly that it is imperative to conduct systematic research on programs that are supportive of positive child and family outcomes. The field is just beginning to develop program standards through self-assessment techniques, accreditation, and state licensing procedures. Yet relatively little is known empirically regarding which levels of child/adult ratios, group size, caregiver characteristics, and parent involvement are most supportive of social adjustment and cognitive development. A recently approved large-scale provider survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education should provide important information regarding the range and prevalence of program and client characteristics. In 1992, as a result of this study and other efforts, more hard information about school-age child care and a much better understanding of what constitutes high quality child care programs will be available. The next step will be to determine the impact of these programs on the children and families that use them.

Conclusion

The newly enacted federal Child Care and Development Block Grant, the Dependent Care Block Grant, special school-age child care legislation in at least 14 states, municipal sponsorship, and increased corporate interest are examples of progress in policy and program development. Public schools have begun to form partnerships with provider agencies and also offer programs.

Ultimately, good school-age child care must be understood as both a mediating influence that may prevent damage to children, and as an investment in the well-being of children and their families.

For More Information

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